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# California Citizens Committee For Agricultural Labor

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## NATIONAL CONFERENCE TO STABILIZE MIGRANT LABOR

Organized agriculture's feelings were hurt at the National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor. This was the reaction of many of the more than 300 persons who attended the sessions on November 21 and 22, sponsored by the Catholic Council on Working Life at Chicago's Loyola University.

This hurt feeling attitude, and the absence of any explanation of a point of view, is a condition well known to Californians interested in stabilizing migrant labor but it came as a surprise to many persons unacquainted with the farm labor problem in mass production states. Grower representatives had been invited to give their point of view and certainly, most of the persons who came from all over the country, and from Puerto Rico, Canada, and Brazzaville, French Equatorial Africa, were anxious to hear it.

## Hurt Feelings

At the end of the conference, Matt Triggs, a representative of the American Farm Bureau from Washington, D. C., who was a silent observer during the entire conference, stated that although many critical things had been said about agriculture, he wanted everyone to know that there are two sides to all questions and that agriculture has its side. Then he sat down.

In a noontime address, the Most Reverend Robert E. Lucey, Catholic Archbishop of San Antonio, had declared that, in the field of migrant labor, "to suppress inequities and employer rapacity, the Ten Commandments have not worked, and the penitentiary is too remote. What is needed is labor organization."

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ricultural Workers of America)  
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In response to this, John Zuckerman of Stockton, representing the California Growers Farm Labor Committee, complained to the entire conference:

"At the luncheon today, American farmers were insulted by your highest ranking guest and insulted thoroughly. If I had known that was to happen, I would not have attended this conference."

#### Stabilization Through Labor Organization

The suggestion for stabilizing migrant labor through labor unions and thereby assisting migrants to become permanent residents of communities was advanced, not only by the Archbishop, but by a California grower, Frederick Van Dyke, of Stockton, California, and by John W. Livingston, director of organization for the AFL-CIO, who is in overall charge of the unionization drive now in progress in the Central Valleys of California by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO. Needless to say, the growers' official representatives did not endorse this suggestion for stabilization.

Van Dyke told the conference that he had signed a collective bargaining agreement with the AWOC - the first grower in California to do so - and that his crops were harvested on time and in better condition than previously. His suggestion for stability was the hiring hall.

#### Organized Agriculture Speaks

Zuckerman, a spokesman for organized agriculture, confounded the conference by inconsistencies and arguments which did not stand the test of questioning from the floor.

He told the conference, for instance, "I doubt if any of you would like to become migrant workers...I know I would not..."

Then, in relation to Public Law 78, under which approximately 500,000 Mexican citizens are imported into the United States annually to do farm work, he asserted, "In the areas where Mexican Nationals are employed, the setting of a minimum wage which may be paid to braceros (fifty cents an hour) has caused the wage rates of domestic migrants to increase materially."

Not content with this incredible statement, he then attempted to show that the lot of the migrant had been vastly improved through gains made by legislation since Public Law 78 was enacted in 1951. These, he said, included social security benefits upon retirement, the possibility of a minimum wage for women and children in eight states, compulsory workmen's compensation in 15 states, laws or regulations applying to farm labor contractors in seven states and regulation of farm labor camps in about half of the states. (He did not say, however, whether or not organized agriculture supported these reforms.) There are no states, he admitted, where minimum wage laws apply to agricultural workers and none that provide unemployment insurance.

After Zuckerman's talk, the Very Rev. Msgr. George D. Higgins, director of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, pointed to the inconsistency of the statement that Zuckerman, for one, would not like to be a migrant, and that the lot of the migrants had been materially improved since the passage of Public Law 78.

James Murray, acting secretary of the California Citizens Committee for Agricultural Labor, pointed out that despite Zuckerman's claim that agricultural wages had increased, they had actually declined between 1952 and 1958 in seventeen major crops in the Sacramento Valley, according to the "California Weekly Farm Labor Report".

Zuckerman airily dismissed this, declaring, "I know those figures, but they are wrong. We are preparing figures of our own to show that they are wrong."

Nevertheless, the panel chairman, Louis Levene, assistant director of the U. S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Employment Security, which is charged with administering the Mexican program, stated flatly that farm wages had not increased since the enactment of Public Law 78.

#### Built-In Adverse Effect

This apparent effect of Public Law 78 upon agricultural economics was confirmed by BES director, Robert C. Goodwin, who told the conference, "We know we have a built-in adverse effect in the Mexican program". (According to Section 503 of Public Law 78, Mexicans may not be used in this country if their use would adversely affect domestic agricultural workers.)

And Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell, addressing the Sunday luncheon meeting, stressed this point by declaring that the widening gap between the wages in agriculture and industry is being brought about by the use of foreign workers.

Secretary Mitchell reviewed the report made to him by four consultants for the revision of Public Law 78, and emphasized that migrant labor would never be stabilized nor take its place on a relatively equal footing with free American labor unless greater efforts are made to recruit and hold American citizens to work in agriculture.

The Secretary said that, lacking legislation, his department is attempting to stabilize migrant labor by regulation. This, he assured the growers, will not unionize farm workers. "But", he added, "the conditions that these workers confront, conditions apparently protected by some farm interests, most certainly may."

Adding his voice to the complaint that positive proposals for change in the field of migrant labor are never advanced by the agricultural industry, the Secretary said, "One would think that the

employers of migrant labor would long ago have offered proposals to improve the lot of those people with whom they deal, but proposals do not come forth."

#### Federal Laws Needed

All speakers interested in stabilizing agricultural workers, to the end that migration might be minimized, admitted that federal laws providing for a minimum wage and unemployment insurance and state laws providing for workmen's compensation and other benefits - advantages that are denied agricultural workers - would materially assist such stabilization, together with a reduction in the importation of foreigners. But, it was conceded, the greatest stumbling block is the political power of the growers to prevent the enactment of such legislation.

Some observers felt that the representatives of organized agriculture who attended the Chicago conference were more interested in preserving the elaborate system created to import Mexicans than they are in revealing the very real difficulties which genuine farmers must cope with in our complicated economy. There can be no doubt that there has grown up, at least in the five states which use the greatest number of Mexicans, a bureaucracy, employed by the growers, to administer the program. These men have big jobs and earn big money. If efforts are made to stabilize migrant labor by offering better wages and conditions to Americans and by the gradual elimination of the need to use Mexicans, these men, now grown rich through the Mexican program, would lose their hold on agriculture.

#### Real Farmers Need Spokesmen

It was thought that, at another meeting, the real working farmer and even the big investor in corporate farms, whose viewpoint is never made known, might seek to reveal their thoughts for altering a system which is universally condemned. If farmers, and not the entrepreneur in the exploitation of Mexican Nationals, were the spokesmen for agriculture, perhaps the hope of Secretary Mitchell for constructive proposals for change might be attained. It is the representatives of the orchard and row crop industries which always purport to speak for agriculture in labor matters, never the representatives of the cattle, dairy, grain and poultry industries which pay relatively better wages and do not use imported foreign labor. Zuckerman, though a grower, is a user of Mexican Nationals.

A hopeful indication was received by the conference in an announcement at its end by Msgr. Higgins that the representatives of farm employers present had privately agreed to an "off the record" conference in the near future at which their real problems would be aired.

#### Questions For Farmers

If representatives of the men who actually pay the bill for wages, rather than those who are paid to administer the Mexican program, are present at such a conference, perhaps answers from the growers point of view to some of the following questions might be provided:

1. To what extent does cheap farm labor contribute to over-production of farm products, in relation to domestic needs, to the detriment of all of us?

2. To what extent would growers be willing to contribute to the construction of adequate housing for agricultural families as one way to ensure a more stable work force?

3. Would it be economically sound to provide domestic agricultural workers with some of the benefits that foreign agricultural workers have enjoyed?

4. To what extent does cheap labor impede farm mechanization?

It is felt by persons interested in farm labor in California that the growers themselves probably are not aware of the kind of representation they received at this most significant farm labor conference. One of the functions of our committee should be the encouragement of growers to assign some thoughtful person, who has made a study of the very real and complex problems of the growers, to the task of representing them.

To this end, we will send this issue of our newsletter to some members of grower organizations in the hope that they may be interested in presenting their views at some future conference.

The entire proceedings of the Chicago Conference will be published and may be obtained from:

Rev. Robert A. Reichert  
National Conference to Stabilize Migrant Labor  
21 W. Superior  
Chicago 10, Illinois.

Among those who participated, as speakers or panel chairmen, at this first national conference on the migrant worker, in addition to those mentioned above, were:

Dr. Paul Mundy, Professor of Sociology  
Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois

Dr. Varden Fuller, Professor of Agricultural Economics  
University of California, Berkeley, California

Willis Jensen, President, Opportunity Council,  
Arlington Heights, Illinois

Robert C. Leitner, Supervisor of Industrial Relations,  
Libby, McNeil & Libby, Chicago, Illinois

Catherine Daly, Daly Farms,  
Denton Harbor, Michigan

Tony T. Dechant, Secretary-Treasurer,  
National Farmers' Union, Denver, Colorado

Dr. Cameron Hall, Executive Director,  
Department of Church and Economic Life,  
National Council of Churches,  
Division of Christian Life and Work, New York

John R. Fleming, Public Health Administrator of  
Van Buren County, Paw Paw, Michigan

Don Fernando, Sierra Berdecio, Secretary of Labor  
Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Right Rev. Msgr. Edward M. Burke, Chancellor  
Archdiocese of Chicago

Representative Paul Simon, Troy, Illinois

William L. Batt, Jr., Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of  
Labor and Industry, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Paul H. Douglas, U. S. Senator from Illinois

#### AGRICULTURAL WAGE BOARD SET UP BY IWC

In a first step to implement the historic decision to set wages, hours, and other working conditions for women and minors in agriculture, the Industrial Welfare Commission of California met in Los Angeles on November 20 to decide the number and composition of the Agricultural Wage Board which will consider these matters.

The motion, passed unanimously by the commission, set up a wage board of 17 persons, 8 employer representatives, 8 employee representatives, and an impartial chairman, to be selected from the following types of agricultural operations; (1) cotton, (2) potatoes, (3) vegetables, (4) berries, (5) deciduous fruits, (6) nuts, (7) citrus and subtropical fruits, and (8) all other crops (cash grain, dairy, poultry, etc.)

Various suggestions were placed before the board as to representative categories, with the grower spokesmen urging the most detailed breakdowns possible. Joe Ullman of the United Packinghouse Workers read into the record a letter, jointly signed by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, calling for selection of wage board members based on the four broad categories used by the California Department of Employment in its work; fruits and nuts, vegetables, field crops, and other crops.

Speaking on behalf of our Citizens Committee for Agricultural Labor, Anne Draper supported the broad-category selection and pointed out that the nature of the orders to be issued - minimum wages, hours, and working conditions - will be based on the health and welfare needs of the women and minors, regardless of whether they pick peaches or strawberries.

The specific question was raised as to whether the motion meant that employee representatives must come from the narrow categories given and how that would affect qualified agricultural representatives from such groups as the California Labor Federation, the AWOC, the UPW, and the Citizens Committee, whose knowledge and background might not be specifically in a given crop. The chairman then clarified the motion and gave assurance that proposed employee representatives from such groups would be given consideration on a broader basis.

The Commission is now sending out requests for recommendations of persons to serve on the Agricultural Wage Board. All recommendations must be sent to the Commission, 965 Mission Street, San Francisco 3, no later than December 28. Forms for this purpose may be obtained from that office, and it is strongly urged that you give this matter your immediate attention. The Commission will meet next on Friday, January 8, to select the board members.

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